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Nichole Hugo PhD Candidate
Arizona State University

Gyan Nyaupane
Arizona State University

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Understanding Nature-based Festivals

Nichole Hugo
PhD Student
Arizona State University
12836 N. Mimosa Dr., Fountain Hills, AZ 85268
(602)790-5565
Nichole.Hugo@asu.edu

Gyan Nyaupane
Associate Professor
Arizona State University
411 N. Central Ave, UCENT 545, Phoenix, AZ 85004
(602) 496-0166
Gyan.Nyaupane@asu.edu

INTRODUCTION

Although there is an increasing trend of nature-based festivals, there is a lack of research in this area. About 90 million Americans (which account for 38% of the US population) participated in wildlife related recreation in 2011 and spent nearly \$145 billion (Hobbs & Lydecker, 2012). Birding festivals themselves have grown in North America 10-15 in the early 1990s, to 79 in 1997 and increased dramatically to 200 festivals in 2006 (Lawton, 2009). In addition to the economic benefits to the communities, nature festivals enrich the livelihoods of the communities through the celebration of local history and supporting conservation efforts (National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, 1999; Millar, 2003). Nature-based festivals can be grouped into two different categories: 1) festivals organized to watch birds and animals, and 2) festivals or events that attract tourists to see live natural activities, such as volcanoes, and astrological activities, including solar and lunar eclipses. This study will be focusing on the first category of nature-based festivals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to test recreational specialization to determine if becoming more specialized and committed to bird watching increases spending by participants at the Wings over Wilcox Festival. There are at least 300 wildlife based events in the US and Arizona alone has eight annual events that include Wings over Wilcox, Tres Rios Nature and Earth Festival, Verde Valley Birding and Nature Festival, Payson Wildlife Fair, Flagstaff Outdoor Festival, Southwest Wings Birding and Nature Festival, Tucson Bird and Wildlife Festival, and Woodland Wildlife Festival. Within the limited studies on nature-based events, most of them are atheoretical reports to assess the economic impacts of these festivals to communities. The objective of this paper is to conceptualize the nature-based events on the basis of specialization of participants. This study was conducted at the Wings over Wilcox Festival. The Wings over Wilcox is a birding and nature festival which takes place every year during the Martin Luther King Jr. weekend in Wilcox, Arizona. One of the major attractions of the festival is migratory birds, including sand hill cranes. The festival offers nature expo educational booths, nature-related vendors that sell items such as jewelry, books and souvenirs, and live animal displays

(Wings over Wilcox, 2013). Guided field trips and seminars are also offered during the five day event.

Recreation specialization was originally defined by Bryon (1977) as “a continuum of behavior from the general to the particular, reflected by equipment and skills used in the sport and activity setting preference” (p. 175). The idea behind this theory is that as a person advances in skill, the resources and motivations to perform the activity will change. It has since evolved to focusing on the behaviors and attitudes of the participants, the acquiring of skills and knowledge, and personal and behavioral commitment, including an economic commitment (Burr & Scott, 2004). Scott and Shafer (2001) classify personal commitment to self-identity and the attachment or inner conviction of the participant to partake in the activity for its own sake, whereas behavioral commitment are the expenses and consequences of investing in the activity instead of other leisure activities.

A previous comparison study of two nature festivals showed that while one event, Brant Festival, received less visitors, more money was spent overall because on average participants spent nearly 7 times the amount of money per person (Hvenegaard, Jenner, & Manaloor, 2005). This could be because participants had to travel farther and spend money on lodging accommodations, have other motivations than just the festival to stay and spend money, or more services were available for participants to spend their money on. However, the data shows that there were more returning participants to the Brant Festival, compared to the other event, the Snow Goose Festival. This could demonstrate that the higher level of commitment to an activity means more money will be spent to participate. Ways of measuring behavior, skill and commitment can be through analyzing years of experience, frequency of participation, the number of sites visited, the type and amount of equipment used, and the number of books or magazines related to the activity that are bought (Lee & Scott, 2004). Further research in this area is needed to determine if specialization in an activity will lead to participants spending more money, specifically in the area of bird watching.

MERHODS

Data for this study was collected from the participants who attended the Wings over Wilcox Festival at Wilcox, Arizona in 2011 and 2012. Surveys were mailed to all participants who attended the event. A total of 240 completed surveys were returned. This study assessed the level of specialization of participants, their motivations, and their relationship with spending behavior.

Exploratory factor analysis showed three types of motivations, including seeing specific birds, nature and wildlife related motivations, and self actualization. Further, the role of birding specialization, motivations, and demographics on spending behavior are analyzed using regression analysis. The results revealed that specialized birding motivation influenced spending.

RESULTS

The results of the study revealed that the mean level of birding skill was 3.79 on a seven point scale (1 being novice to 7 being high skilled). Similarly the mean of self-rated commitment to bird watching was 3.96 on a seven point scale (1 being very casual to 7 being very committed). These results show that the festival was able to attract highly skilled and committed bird watchers.

The results also show that the participants are not just interested in birding, but in nature and wildlife as a whole. The mean score for birding factors was 3.27 and the mean for nature and

wildlife factors was 4.12. This shows that the participants may have other interests in nature in addition to birding that may be considered more valuable to them. This area should be a focus for future studies on this festival in order to test the recreation specialization theory across a larger spectrum.

Table 1

Three Domains of Motivations based on Exploratory Factor Analysis

Motivations	Birding	Nature and Wildlife	Self- Actualization
Build friendships with other birdwatchers	.684		
Add species to list	.756		
Meet people who share my interests	.761		
Expand my knowledge of birds	.795		
Improve my birdwatching skills and abilities	.757		
Challenge my birdwatching abilities	.767		
Contribute to the conservation of birds		.657	
Support wildlife conservation efforts		.749	
Enjoy the natural environment		.709	
Observe all types of wildlife		.759	
Understanding more about myself			.833
Feeling inner harmony			.807
Being creative			.841
Eigen Value	6.04	1.71	1.45
Variance Explained	43.12	12.22	10.35
Reliability (Alpha)	.89	.83	.86
Number of items	6	4	3
Mean	3.27	4.12	3.01

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